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Strife could enlarge ROTC ranks in Iowa

Economy, war on terrorism may steer youths into military.

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Ames, Ia. - The nation's sagging economy and the war on terrorism could be the catalyst U.S. Army recruiters in Iowa and other states need to fill up their ranks.

The Army's Reserve Officer Training Corps on college campuses has failed to generate enough new officers in recent years to meet the military's needs.

The U.S. Army has been hundreds of officers short of its 3,800 annual commissioning goal. Yet recruiters sense a turnaround as college tuition goes up, corporate jobs become harder to find and a once-robust economy declines.

The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks propelled firefighters, police and military leaders to hero status. And the U.S. military response in Afghanistan has jump-started patriotism in a generation that has known little about war, officials say.

"There has been a period of some years where it's been difficult for us," said Paul Kotakis, spokesman for the U.S. Army Cadet Command in Fort Monroe, Va. "There are some strong indicators that the situation will be correcting itself."

About 270 colleges and universities produce 70 percent of U.S. military

officers, said Lt. Col. Michael DePuglio, commander of the University of Northern Iowa's Army ROTC unit.

The University of Iowa's Army ROTC unit soared past its officer goal in 1991, the year of Desert Storm. Iowa State University's ROTC unit barely missed its goal that year.

UNI's ROTC unit produced few officers in 1991 because the program offered limited scholarship opportunities, DePuglio said.

In 2000, just four officers were commissioned from the U of I's ROTC unit, well below the program's annual goal of 14.

A healthy economy in the past four years is partly to blame, officials say.

Grant programs on college campuses compete with ROTC benefits in a good economy. Students can afford tuition. Opportunities in the corporate world are lucrative.

"You won't get rich in the military; that has something to do with it," said Lt. Col. Marvin Meek, commander of ISU's Army ROTC unit.

To some extent, the ebb and flow in recruiting is normal.

"It's American history," said Maj. John McKinney, a training officer at the U of I's Army ROTC unit. "As soon as Desert Storm was over, the Army started dropping divisions. We always build up and then draw down our force."

The Army ROTC's counterparts, the Air Force and Navy ROTC programs, have had similar fluctuations, officials say.

"The problem with the Army is, because we're the largest, we're just naturally going to need more lieutenants," McKinney said. "The Army is the largest branch, manpowerwise, that we have."

The Army ROTC programs at ISU, UNI and the U of I surpassed their goals this year. Recruiters credit a refocused advertising campaign to high school and college students whose "perceptions are perhaps not as strong or are different from a generation when military services were familiar," said Kotakis, of the U.S. Army Cadet Command.

"We have done a better job of explaining to the public what our program really does and a better job of finding what it is we're looking for in terms of individuals," Kotakis added.

Iowa recruiters have tried to eliminate the perception that the ROTC is boot camp. They look for student leaders who can stick with the Army challenge.

And they repeat one of the ROTC's most appealing perks: Cadets qualify for paid tuition, paid textbooks and up to \$350 a month to spend.

Isaac Hunsberger, 18, was ready to play basketball at a private college with limited financial-aid options. A full-ride

scholarship from ISU's Army ROTC program changed his mind.

"The money was a big issue," said Hunsberger, a freshman from Colfax. "I had to look at my future. I could play basketball, but what would I do afterward? I wanted something I could depend on."

Hunsberger had reservations about the Army ROTC. After two months at ISU, he wants to go on active duty after graduation.

"I never ever wanted to go into the Army because I didn't want the Army kind of lifestyle," he said. "But there's so much opportunity that people don't realize. I want a hands-on job where I lead a squad of men and just be an asset to the Army."

At ISU, cadets who walk around campus in camouflage and boots get a warm response from students and professors.

"Sometimes it's not the most popular thing to be a part of," said Brent Hayward, 22, an ISU senior cadet from Marcus. "If we're bombing targets . . . a lot of students protest. But not anymore. The looks you get from people are different."